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Breaking Down the Ivory Tower: Creating a School/University Partnership Where Everyone Benefits

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Abstract
An effective and sustainable university-school partnership requires active participation on the part of both institutions involved. There also need to be clearly articulated goals that outline how the partnership will be beneficial for the school and university. This article provides a description of a partnership formulated on this premise of being mutually beneficial and elaborates on the necessary steps required to foster such a collaborative effort. The theoretical framework underpinning the partnership between a Midwestern university and urban school district is described providing guidance on how other similar institutions might facilitate the creation of their partnerships.

Introduction
The University of Michigan-Dearborn (UM-D) is located at the intersection of several specific demographic groups. In addition, UM-D is situated within a metropolitan area with a dichotomy of economically deprived urban neighborhoods bordered by middle- and upper-class suburbs. These groups have unique needs, and the university operates under a “metropolitan vision” in order to work with the different groups and help them address their various needs. One component of that metropolitan vision, as described by the university chancellor, is to improve preschool and K–12 education.

“UM-D has made a priority of strengthening the effectiveness of teachers and schools, through our programs in the School of Education and our partnerships with urban and metropolitan school systems” (Little, 2009).

This article describes one such program developed through a partnership between the UM-D School of Education (SOE) and the MacArthur K–8 University Academy (MUA), a school in the Southfield Public Schools (SPS).

Background
MacArthur is a school that had been previously closed by the district due to low performance. After extensive
physical renovations, and a complete reorganization of the administrative and teaching staff, the school was reopened with expectations to achieve exemplary status and act as a model school within the district. The partnership between the SOE and MUA sought to extend the university’s metropolitan vision by providing expertise and assistance as the Southfield School District reopened MacArthur. The partnership progressed through several stages that included evaluating the needs of the district, assisting with the professional development of the MacArthur faculty, and the implementation of after-school programs, which brought UM-D faculty in direct contact with the students of MacArthur.

Origins of the Partnership

In 2006, Lynda Wood, Southfield Public Schools associate superintendent for instruction, approached the UM-D senior vice provost for academic affairs about establishing a partnership with SPS. The original intent of the partnership was to create a dual enrollment program so that qualified SPS students could enroll in classes at UM-D. In addition to the interest in dual enrollment, both institutions articulated other potential goals of the partnership. SPS expressed interest in improving student retention, and the SOE was eager to have an authentic K–12 setting where they could provide field experiences for preservice teachers. MacArthur seemed like a perfect place to provide that authentic setting, and working with the administration and staff there became a primary interest of the SOE.

With the need to establish a clear and definite foundation (Rakow & Robinson, 1997), the partnership between the SOE and MUA began with SOE faculty working closely with Bobbie Hentrel, the school principal at MacArthur, in developing a model for the collaboration. The foundation was largely based on Hentrel’s history of taking failing schools and turning them into award-winning institutions of learning for children (Hentrel, 2005). There was an intentional effort to work with and learn from Hentrel and her staff so that this partnership would not be limited to university faculty providing consulting assistance, as is the case in so many university/school collaborations (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman, & Cook, 2003). This focus on collaboration rather than consultation was further evidenced in a three-day Leadership Institute held on the University of Michigan-Dearborn campus in June 2007. SOE and MacArthur faculty worked together to plan, facilitate, and participate in the various sessions offered during the institute. This collaborative planning event served as a springboard for many of the initiatives that have grown from the partnership, including an after-school enrichment program, which is the primary focus of this article. This paper is descriptive, reporting on the steps taken to initiate and sustain the partnership since 2007. It is our intent that this narrative will serve as an initial model for those interested in establishing similar partnerships.

Lynda Wood’s Voice (Southfield Public Schools associate superintendent for instruction)

The idea of a collaboration between Southfield and UM-D was first suggested to me by a parent in the district who worked on the Dearborn campus. I was immediately intrigued by the possibilities and reached out to the university. I was put in touch with the dean of the School of Education and then later introduced to Gail Luera, then associate dean of the SOE. Working with Luera, we planned a summer institute for June 2007 that brought together faculty from UM-D and MacArthur. A primary objective of this institute was to formulate a shared consensus on what the collaboration between the two institutions would entail. I was very pleased with the amount of enthusiasm and energy exhibited by everyone involved in the summer institute and felt confident that the collaboration would move ahead in a variety of ways.

Gail Luera’s Voice (former associate dean of School of Education, associate professor of science education)

During the summer institute in June 2007 it became apparent that high on the list of priorities for MacArthur
faculty was increased professional development focusing on differentiated instruction. In addition, central to the needs of MacArthur faculty was further development in instructional approaches to science education. Consequently, faculty members at UM-D were very interested in seeking to develop a collaborative relationship with MacArthur faculty to meet the instructional needs of the students. At the close of the summer institute, it was clear that both MacArthur and UM-D faculty held the same vision and approaches to teaching and learning. As a result, several faculty members from the SOE agreed to conduct professional development sessions at MacArthur to demonstrate teaching strategies pertaining to technology integration, scientific inquiry, and differentiated instruction among other topics. In addition, the idea of the after-school enrichment program started to formulate, and I was initially put in charge of managing that program for the SOE. Soon after, I asked for volunteers from the faculty to organize and run the program, and Stein Brunvand expressed interest in doing this. Once the program was up and running, I was able to have some of the students from my science education courses serve as instructors at MacArthur, which allowed them to put into practice the things I had been teaching them in class.

Theoretical Framework: Fostering a Successful Partnership

The collaboration between MacArthur and UM-D was created around two guiding tenets informed by existing research on successful school/university partnerships. The first of these guidelines involves the need to have an explicit focus on achieving mutually beneficial outcomes for both the university and school partner (Jenkins, 2001; Petrie, 1995; Teitel, 1996). Several such partnerships have failed as the result of proper attention not being paid to the need for mutual development and improvement (Noguera, 1998). The common perception is that the primary beneficiaries of university-school partnerships are university faculty who are able to conduct research and write articles for publication, while partners in the K–12 schools are not always able to easily identify similar tangible benefits (Mullen, 2000). This can often result in the schools being unconvinced that their role in the partnership was acknowledged or appreciated. Rakow and Robinson (1997, p. 64) describe this phenomenon in partnerships between universities and schools as a “dichotomy between the ‘ivory tower’ of the university and the ‘trenches’ of the public school.” The collaboration between the UM-D and MacArthur was designed from the start to be mutually beneficial to both institutions, and a concerted effort was made to ensure that stakeholders from both institutions had a voice in defining the goals of the partnership at each step of its development.

The other guiding principle of this school-university partnership was the importance of maintaining a shared vision through open and productive lines of communication so that all parties felt empowered to contribute in the planning and decision-making process (Bullough & Kauchak, 1997; Peel, Peel, & Baker, 2002). University faculty often have the technical skills and resources necessary to implement different educational programs while public school teachers and administrators possess the classroom experience and knowledge of the student population required to put those programs into practice (Patterson, Shaver-Wetzel, & Wright, 2001). Making sure that everyone had the chance to share his/her respective expertise was critical to the success of the partnership. Mullen (2000) suggests that in order to foster cooperative participation between all parties, it can be helpful to create “walkways” to facilitate communication and take advantage of the collective knowledge of the group. These walkways should be two-way so that information and ideas can flow and are encouraged from both school and university personnel equally (Mullen, 2000). This can help guard against the tendency of university faculty to “talk to” rather than “work with” classroom teachers and promote more thoughtful analysis of relevant issues (Sandholtz, 2002). Open and enriching lines of communication can also aide in the adoption of new ideas as individuals are better able to see how expertise shared by others is relevant to their
own work (Janiunaite, 2009). The SOE and MacArthur partnership maintained open and productive walkways through the use of e-mail, face-to-face planning sessions, informal meetings, and regular phone conversation in order to combine the technical skills and resources of the UM-D faculty with the knowledge and insight of the MacArthur teachers.

The partnership between UM-D and MacArthur resulted in a variety of initiatives, one of which was the development of an after-school enrichment program. These types of enrichment programs are beneficial to students because they can promote engagement in the learning process, develop competency in real-world skills, and provide positive interactions with adult role models (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Miller, 2003). Time spent in these structured extracurricular environments has a positive impact on academic achievement as measured by standardized tests and decreases the dropout rate among at-risk youth in particular (Cooper, Valentine, Bye, & Lindsay, 1999; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). In addition, after-school programs often have more flexibility with regards to curricular requirements, which means that students can have greater control over their learning experiences and explore areas of interest more fully (Francsali & Froschl, 2006). Considering these proven benefits, we decided to focus the energy and resources of our school-university collaboration on the development and implementation of an after-school program at MacArthur.

Methodological Approach
After two years of implementing the after-school sessions, we wanted to determine if and how the program was impacting various stakeholders within the partnership. This included investigating the connection between the formation and facilitation of the program and our professed theoretical framework of mutual benefit and open communication. To facilitate this analysis we used narrative inquiry, which is increasingly used in studying educational experiences that focus on determining the impact of an educational program on the participants. According to Connelly & Clandinin (1990), “educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories of learners, teachers, and researchers… it is the storytellers and characters in their own and others’ stories” (p. 1). The narrative provides a useful framework to identify the nature of the experience to be studied as well as the patterns of inquiry necessary in the study of lived experiences as it places emphasis on the individual over the social context. Denzin & Lincoln (1994) note “knowledge is constructed from experience,” hence “participants reconstruct their perceptions and experience into representational form that illustrates, interprets, and appraises the qualities that have been experienced” (p. 129). Within this context, narrative is presentational rather than representational, hence the narrative inquiry used in this research presents the researchers’, practitioners’, and researcher/practitioners’ (participants’) lived experiences.

The storied context of this research is situated within the perspectives of multiple participants. The voices that emanate are in fact personal and impersonal narrations of how the collaboration was initiated and how each partner perceived and acted in individualistic roles intent on contributing to the success of this endeavor. At the same time, each partner interpreted the stories that made meaning of their lived experiences and those of their UM-D/MacArthur partners. Therefore, our narrative inquiry, like others using this methodological approach (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), is sociologically concerned with groups and the formation of community.

The data in this approach may take a wide variety of forms, which according to Dorson, (1976) may include material culture, art, myths, poems, and recollection. Recollection for the purpose of this research is the storied experiences of participants and researchers within the context of a school/university collaboration. Corresponding with narrative inquiry, this study used as raw data the stories of the participants, these were then analyzed and discussed with the genre of university school collaboration successes and failures. For Connelly & Clandinin (1990) the “educational importance of this line of work is that it brings theoretical ideas about
the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived” (p. 3). Several of the researchers in the collaboration were also participants in open, equal, multidirectional dialogue, which was crucial in establishing and maintaining the partnership between these two educational institutions. According to Denzin & Lincoln (1994), “researchers study problems anchored in their personal biographies” (p. 205). Similarly, this paper is a collection of biographies about a particular university-school collaboration and how the individuals involved worked “outward and inward from the personal histories” (p. 205) to represent the perceived successes of this collaboration. It is the retelling of personal stories such as these that make it possible for growth and learning to transpire (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

The stories and biographies represented in this article were collected through interviews with teachers and administrators at MUA as well as faculty and preservice teachers at UM-D involved with the after-school program. Several of the participants (three UM-D faculty, three MUA faculty, two SOE students) were asked open-ended general questions during semistructured, conversational interviews to find out how each participant came to be involved in the partnership, why they wanted to be involved, what their role(s) was, and what they perceived as the benefits of the partnership (see Appendix for full interview protocol). Our analysis focused on detecting trends and patterns in responses and investigating how the partnership might be improved in the future. Both the data collected from the interviews and the trends that emerged will be discussed in the next sections of this paper.

Implementation of the After-School Program: Creating a Shared Vision through Open Communication

The first four-week session of the after-school enrichment program started in October 2008. Since that time, six more sessions have been offered continuing through winter 2010. Initially, the program was intended to focus on increasing student exposure in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in order to complement and extend the required curriculum, as these were areas of need identified by teachers and administrators at MacArthur. As the success of the after-school sessions became apparent, class offerings were expanded to include Mixing Math (a class for students working above grade level in math), Automatic Math (a math remediation class), Active Learning Games, Geography Club, Digital Storytelling, Science Inquiry, Poetry, and Chess Club. Once again, these course topics were suggested by MacArthur personnel based on their knowledge of the student body and areas of need. The open lines of communication maintained between both parties of the collaboration meant that they felt free to make these suggested changes to the program. UM-D students were recruited to teach many of these additional classes based on their major/minor area of study.

Teacher and administrative input was critical in deciding what classes to offer and what student populations to target. Regular contact via e-mail, phone, and face-to-face conversations allowed the input to flow both ways within the collaboration and helped to keep everyone informed. Linda Barlow, a fourth-grade teacher at MacArthur put in charge of coordinating the program for the school, was particularly helpful in providing input and guidance on behalf of the school.

Linda Barlow’s Voice (MacArthur coordinator for academic after-school programs)

I have been very instrumental in coordinating the after-school classes that are taught by UM-D faculty and students. I worked with my principal and the UM-D staff to decide what classes would be beneficial to our students. On an ongoing basis it is my responsibility to communicate directly with parents and students about the program and place students in desired classes during each session. I arrange the rooms in which each instructor will teach and make sure they have the supplies needed for their lessons. During the last several sessions, I have provided a brief in-service on classroom management for the UM-D student instructors. These sessions have been
well received and have had a noticeable impact on their ability to maintain control in their respective classes.

Having direct communication with teachers such as Linda Barlow made it possible for university faculty members and preservice teachers to customize their instruction for the topics requested and students enrolled in the different after-school courses. Karen Thomas-Brown, a faculty member in social studies education, taught the Geography Club and Stein Brunvand, a faculty member in educational technology, taught Digital Storytelling. Both of these faculty members structured their sessions around the needs identified by Linda Barlow and her colleagues at MUA.

Stein Brunvand’s Voice (UM-D educational technology professor)
I first got involved in this collaboration by conducting a professional development (PD) session on digital storytelling with the MacArthur teachers as a way to introduce some of the many technologies that were available to them. As a result of this PD session, the MacArthur administration was eager to have me teach a similar session in an after-school enrichment program. I agreed to teach a class in digital storytelling as part of this enrichment program during spring 2008. I worked closely with Linda Barlow and other teachers at MUA to determine what technology was available in the school. This was very helpful in selecting what tools to use with the students so they could create their digital stories. In addition, the teachers at MUA provided me with topics for the students to write about in their stories so that the work I did in the after-school session more closely aligned with the curriculum students were being taught during the regular school day. This made the work more relevant to the students, and teachers were eager to have them share their digital products in their respective classes since the stories complimented the content they were already teaching.

In addition to getting input from the teachers and administrators at MUA, the design of my digital storytelling class was influenced by the fact that integrating technology into instruction in meaningful ways can have a positive impact on student motivation and self-esteem (U.S. Department of Education, 1995) as well as on academic achievement (Page, 2002). Digital storytelling has been defined as “a form of short narrative, usually a personal narrative told in the first person, presented as a short movie for display on a television or computer monitor, or projected onto a screen” (Davis, 2005, p. 1). Supporting students in the creation of their own digital stories not only helps them improve their critical-thinking skills and writing competency but also helps them develop in the area of media literacy (Ohler, 2005). In addition, allowing students to tell stories can aide in language acquisition and the development of independent reading skills (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Taking advantage of the free or low-cost multimedia production tools available to K–12 students, such as Windows Movie Maker and VoiceThread (http://voicethread.com/#home), provides young writers with the chance to share their voice creatively with sound effects, music, imagery, and even video clips. It was my goal to utilize these types of tools in my class so that students could create digital representations of their writing.

Karen Thomas Brown’s Voice
(UM-D social studies professor)
My initial involvement with the MacArthur K–8 University Academy partnership came in 2007 as the Southfield school district began working on reopening this school. As part of this professional development, I presented to teachers on the practicality and usefulness of geography as an everyday tool. I tried to dispel the perceptions that geography was all about locating places on a map and tried to have the teachers make tangible connections with this discipline. I then presented them with my proposal to do the same thing if I were allowed to create and operate an after-school geography club. There was an immediate interest in my ideas and the geography teacher, Mrs. J. Stevenson, immediately made
contact with me. Since then, the relationship between Mrs. Stevenson and myself has grown beyond my simply offering an after-school program in her discipline. We meet once or twice each semester to discuss her plans for the students. I offer her whatever she needs in terms of curriculum clarification, resources that come from my social studies methods classes, and insights into how to teach difficult topics, and she legitimizes my efforts to bring authentic examples of a classroom geography teacher’s perspectives into my college-level methods classes. Mrs. Stevenson also provides me with insights into the topics she covers in her geography units, and this allows me to tailor the curriculum I offer in the after-school Geography Club to complement what she does.

The relationship I share with Mrs. Stevenson is guided by open two-way communication. Our discussions and decisions are shared with the coordinators of the after-school program at UM-D and MacArthur.

As evidenced through the previous narratives, maintaining open lines of communication was critical in the planning and ongoing implementation of the various after-school sessions. In addition, collaborative partners from both MacArthur and UM-D were viewed as equal contributors of knowledge and expertise since each member brought unique and relevant information to the planning process.

**Impact of the After-School Program: Ensuring Mutual Benefit**

Bobbie Hentrel, principal at MacArthur, indicated early on that she was interested in implementing the after-school enrichment program because of the enhanced academic experiences it would provide to students. As a parallel goal, the program was also designed to provide the SOE at UM-D with a laboratory school where faculty could model best practices to their undergraduate preservice teachers. This is a prime example of how the collaboration coalesced around mutually beneficial goals and provided opportunities for both sides to shape the program to meet their needs. Judging by the reflections that follow, both parties have been able to realize their respective benefits in large part because of their willingness to work together and remain open to suggestions and ideas from all stakeholders.

**Bobbie Hentrel’s Voice (MacArthur principal)**

The after-school program has just been so successful. I have asked the district superintendent for more funds to ensure the sustenance of this program. I have also been able to add some of my own staff to increase the number of activities offered in this after-school program. Without the partnership with UM-D and MacArthur University Academy staff, we just couldn’t go on. Our school is open four nights per week offering engaging academic activities for our kids. These programs have helped us to achieve the goal of having our kids academically focused, and they enjoy several of these activities. We even have other universities who are hearing about the work UM-D is doing with us, and now they are offering to come in and partner with us and other Southfield schools.

**Linda Barlow’s Voice (MacArthur coordinator for academic after-school programs)**

First of all, I must say that our staff can’t begin to say how grateful we are to be working with UM-D. We are proud that such a fine school has taken an interest in our students. We appreciate the efforts of Gail Luera (SOE associate dean), Stein Brunvand, and Karen Thomas-Brown, who we see on a regular basis working diligently with MacArthur’s students and staff to make this partnership a success. Establishing the partnership with UM-D has raised the expectations of students and parents when it comes to educational opportunities. Students do not look at higher education as an option but rather as a requirement. In return, they work hard to create this reality for themselves.

The success of the after-school program with UM-D is that students are having fun while they learn and our parents are excited that their children are participating in something educational and engaging. The other big benefit to families is that the program is free for all students. I believe it is a win-win situation for all of the
parties involved. The after-school program allows the UM-D faculty to stay in touch with the children that they are training future teachers to teach. The program helps to bridge the gap between K–12 and higher education, and by working closely with university personnel, students realize that college is within their reach. Finally, the university is a wonderful resource for our staff. Teachers are so immersed with day-to-day activities, it is difficult to get out and find out about newly proven research strategies that help to better educate students. The UM-D faculty helps by providing in-service trainings and by modeling best practices in their teaching of enrichment classes.

**Stein Brunvand’s Voice (UM-D educational technology professor)**

The MacArthur partnership provided the SOE with an energetic K–8 school environment where faculty could interact with dedicated teachers and students to learn more about the educational process. This has been an effective way for faculty to stay grounded in the realities of the classroom, which in turn, has helped them to provide more practical knowledge to their students. In addition to being able to gain more practical experience in a K–8 environment, many of the UM-D faculty members who have participated in the MacArthur collaboration have been able to conduct research, collect data, and pursue publications as a result of their work with the MacArthur students and teachers.

Several SOE students have served as instructors for the MacArthur after-school program. This experience has given them the chance to lesson plan for a relevant situation and student population rather than the hypothetical planning they do in most of their courses at the university. Not only have they been able to create authentic lesson plans, they have also been able to carry out and reflect on the success of those plans. By serving as instructors, SOE students have practiced their classroom management skills with a smaller group of students (classes normally range in size from 12 to 18 students) rather than having to work with a larger, more traditionally sized classroom of 25–30 students. The smaller class size creates a less threatening and more manageable situation within which our preservice teachers have been able to work and learn. The benefits of participating in the enrichment program are clearly articulated in the following comments from two of our preservice teachers who served as instructors.

Now that I have participated in this collaboration, I will be much more prepared for how to set up a classroom, how to handle particular social situations between students, and how to engage my potential students, essentially making them want to learn and be at school every day. (Samantha Robinson, elementary education preservice teacher)

All in all, I learned that, regardless of whether it is classroom management or proceeding through a lesson plan in class, circumstances are bound to change, and as a teacher one must know how and be willing to do some planning on the spot. A teacher must be receptive to his/her students’ responses and plan or accommodate accordingly. One must be efficient at multitasking as well as about the students. (Lamees Nadala, elementary education preservice teacher)

**Conclusion**

The university-school partnership established between MacArthur and the University of Michigan-Dearborn provides evidence that there does not always have to be a dichotomy between the university, perceived as the “ivory tower,” and the public schools, perceived as the “trenches.” This paper demonstrates that working towards mutually beneficial outcomes can result in a positive and productive partnership. Evident from the preceding discussion is the fact that the partnership between UM-D and the MacArthur K–8 University Academy has been deemed a success by both institutions. It is reflective to say that this is not a conclusion but a continuation, since the partnership between the SOE at UM-D and MacArthur is ongoing and iterative. MacArthur continues to provide a
real-life school setting where UM-D faculty and preservice teachers can put theory into practice while interacting with experienced K–12 educators. Parents and students of MacArthur realize that the school offers children more than just the state-mandated curriculum. The fact that after two academic years, both the school and the university are interested in maintaining and strengthening the collaboration speaks volumes for the work that has been done in this partnership. The success of this program is largely a result of the emphasis on fostering a mutually beneficial experience and acknowledging the expertise and talent of all parties involved. Without these elements in place, the after-school program would not be realizing such a positive outcome.

References


Appendix: Interview Protocol

MacArthur K–8 University Academy/University of Michigan-Dearborn Collaboration Interview Protocol

This interview protocol is intended for use with adult subjects only and will be used to interview faculty at the MacArthur K–8 University Academy and the University of Michigan-Dearborn as well as the preservice teachers who served as instructors for the after-school enrichment program at MacArthur.

Questions for MacArthur K–8 University Academy Faculty and Administration

1. What were the main reasons you wanted to establish a collaborative partnership with the UM-D?
2. What was your role in establishing the partnership?
3. What were your desired goals from this partnership and how did you communicate those goals?
4. How did/does this type of partnership relate to your current or future scholarly work (Ph.D. dissertation perhaps), past experiences, professional/career goals, and needs of the school and community?
5. Did you have to modify your expectations for the collaboration with UM-D for any reason? If so, how and why?
6. Were STEM areas (science, technology, engineering, and math) deliberately chosen for this collaboration?
7. What components were chosen, and what components came about by chance?
8. What are the things you do to coordinate the collaboration on a regular basis?
9. What is the process for enrolling students in the after-school enrichment program?
10. What are your impressions of the success, benefits, and drawbacks of the collaboration?

Questions for University of Michigan-Dearborn (UM-D) Faculty and Administration

1. How does the partnership relate to UM-D’s and the School of Education’s (SOE) perspective and overall goals?
2. What were the broad goals the SOE wanted to achieve?
3. How did these goals relate:
   • to the goals of the MacArthur administration and faculty?
   • to the needs of MacArthur?
   • to the needs of the SOE?
   • to UM-D faculty goals?
   • to SOE student needs?
   • to how UM-D thought the SOE could serve the community?
4. How did you help facilitate the collaboration?

Questions for Preservice Teachers serving as Instructors in the After-School Enrichment Program

1. What were your reasons and goals for working with the MacArthur/UM-D after-school collaboration?
2. How did/does working with this collaboration contribute to your preparation as a teacher?
3. What have you learned from this collaboration?
4. How do you think your participation in this collaboration will impact your approach to teaching in the future?
5. What do you feel are the goals of the collaboration?


